

The Perfect Summer Day by cali-chan (girls_are_weird)

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Summary:

"Why didn't you go into the water with the others?"

"Because I want to go in with you."

Joyce and Hopper take the kids on a day trip to the beach, and El helps Mike conquer one of his biggest fears. PG, fluff/romance, post-S2, Mike/Eleven.

The Perfect Summer Day

Author's Note:

This one goes out to **tank03** on FFN, who (some centuries ago) suggested that I write a story where El teaches Mike something. I know she's not *technically* teaching him how to swim here as I first intended, but I hope this still counts.

El smiled down at her feet as the soft waves lapped at her toes.

Summer 1986 had dawned early, and the Party was determined to make the best of it. Given how... eventful the previous summer had been, and adding to it the fact that El was now fully "out in the world," so to speak, they thought they had a good chance of making this summer one to remember and had set their plans accordingly.

After many days biking aimlessly around, going to the movies, hanging out at the arcade (or the diner, or the video store, or the quarry, or the park), and generally everything Hawkins had to offer a bunch of fifteen-year-olds, they decided it was time to move their activities out of town, try for something new.

Max had been waxing poetic about the beaches in California since the first rays of summertime sunshine hit her skin, and the others seemed just as excited to be able to show El what a real beach was like. She had seen lengthy, sandy beaches on TV and often sighed in wonder at what it would be like, standing at the edge of the ocean, but she'd never been out of Hawkins other than to Chicago and she'd been too busy then to check that particular item off her bucket list. The rest of the group, of course, couldn't let this stand.

Steve had been their first choice of a driver, but he had to work, so it fell on Hopper and Joyce to pack all the kids into their cars and make the drive up to Miller beach. They hadn't been sure Joyce's Pinto would make it that far, and Hopper had threatened to chuck Dustin out the window at least fourteen times along the way, but the grown-ups felt the teens deserved this outing; they'd all done well in school

their freshman year, even El, and they deserved something of a reward.

For El, it was the longest trip she'd ever taken in such cramped quarters (the Greyhound to Chicago had been remarkably more comfortable than Hopper's Blazer when it was packed with people and luggage), and she was a little perplexed that she could feel so tired from just sitting there for a few hours, but all those thoughts fled her mind the moment they arrived.

Now they were here, and it was wonderful. Most of her friends were already in the water, splashing around joyfully, but part of El wanted to take a moment to just stand at the edge of the waves and look out at the horizon. She knew it wasn't *really* the ocean, just a really big lake, but it was so vast that there was only blue water as far as her eyes could see, and it looked exactly like the beaches had looked on TV, the ones she had dreamed of visiting. It was beautiful.

It did bring back memories of the lab every once in a while, but not strongly enough to offset her excitement. She'd been taught to swim during her formative years in preparation for the bath— not much of a point in running experiments in a water tank if your subject is going to be freaking out about drowning the entire time, so they had to make sure she was comfortable in the water— and the brininess in the air reminded her of the salt in the sensory-deprivation tests, but turns out, when she wasn't being forced to psychically spy on foreign adversaries or come in contact with monsters from another dimension, she actually quite enjoyed being in the water. And the beach felt... different. Fresher, warmer. More alive. She enjoyed the feeling of the breeze against her face, the sand between her toes, the sun against the already-freckled skin of her shoulders. She loved it here. She couldn't wait to go into the water.

The main reason why she hadn't gone in yet, though, was sitting on the sand some yards behind her. As El looked over her shoulder past Joyce (who was sitting on a towel and slathering on copious amounts of sunblock under Hopper's clearly amused gaze), her gaze fell on Mike, who was a few feet behind, sitting under a large beach umbrella Joyce had set up earlier to signal where they left all their stuff. Mike had been sitting there since they arrived, alternating

between moping and frustration, for reasons El did not yet know. He'd been quieter than usual on the ride over, too.

Why wasn't he going in? And why was he so upset? She thought they were all happy to go to the beach— or at least that's what it had seemed to her, that Mike was as excited as the others to go and show El what the beach was like— and if he wasn't, why hadn't he said something before? They didn't *have* to come to the beach. They could've just stayed in Hawkins. It didn't matter where they were; as long as they were together, they'd find a way to have fun.

Is it the sun? she wondered as she saw him look out toward their friends and frown. Mike's skin was very fair, and she'd seen first-hand how red he would get when he spent a lot of time out in the sun. She knew that could be painful, and it usually lasted a few days before the dead skin shed off and he was left with an extra-dense smattering of freckles on his cheeks, the bridge of his nose, and his shoulders, if he'd been wearing something sleeveless at the time.

But surely if that was the case Joyce could lend him some sunscreen? The sun hadn't stopped him before when they'd hung out outdoors, so why would it bother him now? Plus, he was (much to El's disappointment) wearing a t-shirt, so he probably wouldn't get burned too bad either way. Was it something else? She was starting to get worried.

Only slightly regretting having to walk away from the waves, she made her way past Joyce and Hopper to where Mike was and sat down beside him in the shade of the umbrella. "Hi," she greeted him, and he gave her a smile— if she didn't know him so well, and if she hadn't been watching him earlier, it might've been unnoticeable that he'd been frowning a second ago. But she *did* know him well, and she *had* been watching him earlier, so she knew. "What's wrong?" she asked him, concerned.

"What do you mean? Nothing's wrong," he responded with a nonchalant shrug, valiantly making it seem like his behavior this entire day was completely normal. "Why didn't you go into the water with the others?" he asked then, unwittingly turning her own concerns on her.

"Because I want to go in with you," she replied easily, taking hold of his hand, which had been fiddling with the sand near El's hip. She intertwined her fingers with his as she looked into his eyes, searching.

"Oh," he retorted like he hadn't been expecting that answer. "Well, um, I don't—" He pursed his lips, cutting himself off, and then let out a sigh. "I just— I don't feel like going in just yet, I guess."

That didn't sound true to her. She had a hard time believing he wanted to just sit on the sidelines while all their friends had fun, and it couldn't be that he was waiting for digestion, since the last time they ate had been at breakfast and that had been hours ago. "Is it the sun?" she posited, thinking back to her theory from earlier. "Or can you not swim?" she added, even though she knew for a fact that wasn't the case. They'd been at the public pool in Hawkins before and he hadn't seemed to have a problem with it.

"No, it's not that, it's just—" He sighed again. He looked down at their joined hands for a moment before seeming to decide what he should say, and then he looked up at her again. "I just don't... like... beaches..." he finished tentatively with a cringe, almost like he didn't really want to say the words.

It was El's turn to frown. Given that she'd been thinking just a little while ago how much she loved the beach, she couldn't imagine why anyone would dislike it. But this was Mike; he had to have a reason, a good one. She just wondered why they had to be *at the beach* the first time she heard about this. "Why didn't you say something before?" she asked, confused.

"Because I know it's stupid," he replied with a frustrated groan. He looked out at the waves for a second, where their friends were now having a Chicken fight, Max on Lucas's shoulders and Will on Dustin's as they grappled for dominance against the other, before turning back to her. "When I was seven we went down to Florida to visit my grandmother and we spent some time at the beach," he started, somewhat begrudgingly. "I couldn't go too deep because I was still too short, so I was near the shore."

"The waves were pretty strong, but I was having fun breaking them so it wasn't too bad," he continued. "And then I slipped on something goopy and a wave pushed me down. Next thing I know I'm being thrown around by the waves. I hit my head against something and ended up swallowing a bunch of water."

"Nancy managed to pull me out, and I threw up most of the saltwater, thankfully," he nodded encouragingly at her, clearly noticing how agitated she got as she heard that description. "But it was pretty terrifying. My mom freaked out, took me to the hospital. Dad only said I needed to put more meat in my bones and that I'd be fine with the beach when I grew up. And I'm better about it now that I'm taller and heavier, I really am, but I'm still... not really comfortable with it."

"But you've been to the pool," she said, still a little bit confused and a little bit sad that this was the first time she was hearing about this. She'd told him about so many of her own fears, it seemed unfair to him that she hadn't thought to ask him about his. "And the quarry."

"Yeah, it's—" He shook his head. "It's not the water. It's the waves."

"I understand," El replied with a nod of her own. She could definitely see that. Granted, the waves at Miller beach today weren't terribly rowdy— there was only a slight breeze so the back-and-forth was soft and soothing, in her opinion— but if Mike still wasn't comfortable with them, she could understand that. "We don't have to go in if you don't want to."

"No, no," he shook his head emphatically, tightening his hold on her hand. "Don't worry about me. You go in with the others, I don't..." His shoulders slumped. "You've been looking forward to this so much. I don't want to ruin it for you."

"You're not ruining—"

"No, El, really. You go in. I'll... I'll join you later," he declared bravely, giving her a resolute smile. She could tell that he really meant it. "I've been trying to psych myself up for it this entire time and I'll... I'll get there eventually. I promise."

"Are you sure?" she asked him, wanting to be completely certain that he was okay with this. She didn't want to just leave him sitting here on his own, but he nodded, insistent, and she figured that would be their best solution— until an idea suddenly occurred to her. "Come on," she said, quickly getting to her feet and tugging him up by the hand.

"What are you doing?" he asked, squirming away from her grasp with a laugh when her hands went to the lower hem of his t-shirt. His face went super red, and she wasn't sure if that was from the ticklish sensation or from the embarrassment that she was taking his clothes off, but the mirth in his expression told her it didn't really matter. He conceded, taking his shirt off on his own and dropping it on the ground as she tried really hard not to stare. "Are you taking me in the water?" he asked her a little warily.

"Just a little," she assured him over her shoulder as they made their way to the shore. It's not like she could go in too deep either, anyway; she wasn't particularly tall herself. "Just hold on to me," she added with a dimpled smile, giving his hand a squeeze. "If we get thrown around, at least we'll be together."

"That's not much of a comfort," Mike mumbled under his breath but let her keep pulling him forward nonetheless.

She felt him stiffen and stop when their feet touched the water, and she turned around so she was facing him, extending her other hand so she could hold both of his in hers at arms' length. "Come on," she repeated and started walking backward into the water, waves lapping at her ankles as the wind blew her hair over her face.

He went along with her, even though he kept cringing every time the sand shifted under his weight, and every few feet she would ask "Still okay?" to make sure he was alright with what they were doing and his fear wasn't overwhelming him. He would nod, looking down at his legs with extreme focus, like it was taking all of his concentration to put one foot in front of the other, and she would take a few more steps back, tugging him just a little bit deeper.

Once they reached a place where the water came up to Mike's waist, they stopped. They were just a couple of feet away from where their friends were, and they could feel the waves more at that depth, as they were making them rock gently backward and forward with the tide. "Not too bad, is it?" she asked him with an encouraging smile.

"It's... okay," he decided, trying to keep positive even though she could still hear a tinge of tension in his voice.

She was about to say something else when one of his feet seemed to give from under him. She felt him start to fall backward and saw the panic in his eyes, but before his back could hit the water, she narrowed her gaze and concentrated on pushing him forward with her mind while she tugged him to her by his hands. Once he was once again stable on his feet, she let the pressure go, letting him acclimate to the gentle movement of the waves.

"Are you okay?" she asked him, worried that this little slip might undo the progress he'd already made so far.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "Yeah, fine." His gaze fixed on the movement when she let go of one of his hands to wipe the blood off from under her nose. Something about it made him chuckle. "You know that sharks can detect one drop of blood in one million drops of water?"

She smiled right back at him, delighted that he didn't seem so tense anymore. "There are no sharks in Lake Michigan," she replied smartly, regurgitating a factoid she'd heard in conversation (read: argument) between Dustin and Hopper earlier that morning.

Her response made him laugh, and when he voluntarily took a step forward so he could be closer to her, she knew she had successfully distracted him from his fear of the waves. "You're amazing," he said, beaming down at her before he leaned down and kissed her softly.

"Don't worry, I've got you," she told him as they broke apart, keeping close enough that she could lean in to capture his lips again if she wanted, but as she was about to do just that, *someone* splashed them with so much water that they ended up drenched and sputtering.

"Oy, lovebirds!" came Lucas's voice from behind El, accompanied by their other friends' laughter, which made her suspect that Lucas had been the one to splash them to begin with. "Save that for when we don't have to see it!"

El glared at him over her shoulder and from the way Lucas started cracking up, she was pretty sure Mike had a similar expression on his face.

They stayed there for a bit, cheering on their friends as they played games in the water, and even indulging in a small splashing war once or twice, though nothing too involved. Mike didn't let go of her hand the entire time, but he was laughing and seemed to be having fun, which she was glad to see.

After a while they went back to the shore, where they sat down to let the waves lap at their calves. El laid her head on Mike's shoulder and he wrapped an arm around her waist, and they stayed there talking about their plans for the rest of the afternoon until Joyce called them all out of the water for lunch.

It was the perfect summer day.

Author's Note:

Oh, Mike. I feel you, my sweet freckled child. Shoutout to everyone out there like me who loves the water but hates the sun, and thus spends most of the summer indoors no matter how much sunscreen is at hand. Anyway, I hope you all liked this! I've read so many stories where El can't swim or has a fear of large bodies of water and Mike helps her out, that I figured I'd try something different here.

Miller beach is an actual beach in Indiana, on the southernmost shore of Lake Michigan, which is frequented by residents of both Indiana and Illinois. You can actually see the Chicago skyline from Miller beach, but let's just pretend it was too bright for El to

see it at this point of the day, mmkay? Sharks can, indeed, detect one drop of blood in one million drops of water, though people tend to exaggerate that factoid often. While it's certainly impressive as far as animal olfactory systems go, one million drops of water is only about 50 liters; if you're in the ocean you should be fine unless you're bleeding significantly more than one drop. In reality, a shark's sense of smell is much better attuned to fish extracts, which they can detect up to one part in 10 billion.

Oh, and it's true that there are no sharks in Lake Michigan. Not natively, at least; most sharks can't survive for long in freshwater and although some (like the bullshark) have been known to swim upstream in rivers and even live for years in lakes, it would be pretty difficult even for those to make it all the way from the ocean to Lake Michigan. There was even a story going around in 2016 that a Canadian man had caught a great white shark in Lake Michigan, but that was just fake news. Literally.

(Happy belated shark week? xD LOL.)